The Archaeologist

*Powsels and Thrums: A Tapestry of a Creative Life*, Alan Garner (4th Estate)

Alan Garner is an archaeologist, an excavator of history, language, myth and place. The title of this book refers to scraps of cloth from handloom weaving but Garner's are written scraps of biography, geography, explanations or asides, notes and poems. Slowly they appear to accrue into a book about Alan Garner and how and why he writes.

*Powsels and Thrums* is most related to the author's previous book of essays, *The Voice That Thunders*, which was published in 1997. Like that volume, it gathers together stories – perhaps narratives is a better word, since they are 'true' stories rather than fictions – that anyone interested and paying attention will have read the majority of before, albeit in different, perhaps gestatory, form. Thankfully, it is nothing like the slight 'memoir' Garner offered readers more recently, which did little to inform the complex, original novels that the author is renowned for.

So here are moments in time, stories, memories, poems, summaries of encounters, inspiration and research, family history and thoughts about myth, landscape, place and writing. Here is Alan Garner trying to work out his place in the grand scheme of things.

The scheme of things might be infinite, but Garner's views and navigation of the world are mostly informed by his locale, a specific area of Cheshire. Landscape features, human interventions (such as the radio telescope at Jodrell Bank, mining at nearby Alderley Edge, or half-cut millstones on Mow Cop), historical events and the family's legacy through the continuing presence of what they crafted (stone walls, church steeple, houses) provide evidence enough for Garner's sense of time and place and his role within it.

Throughout, there is a focus on the small scale. Events, finds, shock moments of realisation, conversations, odd phrases and ideas inform the bigger picture. The juxtaposition of Garner's home (a medieval hall with the addition of a relocated timber-framed 16th Century apothecary's house, surrounded by barrows and archaeological evidence of thousands of years of inhabitation) with the somewhat eccentric, almost D.I.Y., construction of Jodrell Bank across the railway tracks, could stand as a metaphor for Garner's ability to hybridise information, make new connections and generate ideas which help produce his writing.

That is not, of course, as simple as Garner sometimes makes out. Although he writes of long periods of research and the time it takes for him to subconsciously process his findings and make links between them so that a story or stories emerge, he is also prone to romanticism and evasion. Leaning towards the idea of shamanism, of speaking for his community, he neglects to consider the writing and editing process itself. I am, of course, well aware that writers don't spend 24 hours a day putting pen to paper or at their computer, writing; writing is also about observing, processing and thinking as much as the physical act. A writer is always a writer, whatever they are doing.

Garner has always maintained that his subconscious does the work, emerging at a certain point – often years after a book's original starting point – almost fully-formed, something that is rather contradicted by the drafts of his work archived at the Bodleian Library. I continue to think there is an element of autobiographical storytelling going on, an authorial persona, a sleight-of-hand which hides Garner's lack of archaeological ability when it comes to excavating himself as a writer!

Still, *Powsels and Thrums* is Garner's most successful 'dig' into himself yet, especially when read in conjunction with *Treacle Walker*, a short novel that explores the same material from other angles and in other ways. If the reader spends time making their own connections between things and thinking through what is being discussed or alluded to, they will find a network of ideas that Garner has established as a foundation for his creativity. He is an author who differentiates between myth and fairy story, who takes new explanations and theories of space and time as licence for the co-existence of memories, ideas, characters and places that are generally regarded as separate.

Elements of Jung's theories are here, too, ideas of communal myths that sustain local communities, folk traditions and tales that inform and explain how we live. Many of the same myths appear in different versions and forms around the world, with reoccurring archetypes of characters and events, but Garner is most interested in the Cheshire versions local to him. He 'excavates' the Wizard of Alderley story which places a sleeping knight under the rocks, linking it to other sleeping heroes around the country and world. The sleeper is a last-chance hero who, explains Garner, must stay asleep as a hope, can never actually be called upon or awoken, because then there is nobody else left to save us. Within his exploration of the story, however, Garner also delves into the etymology of place names within the story he knows, the one he was told by his Grandfather as a child.

Garner does not write to save us, nor to lecture us. He does not wish to clarify or explain. He can be prone to a bit of attitude about outsiders or those he met at university, sometimes tries to mystify the writing process (certainly his own writing process) or reduce it to a craft, yet he is clearly well-read, erudite and thoughtful, just as he wants readers to be. There is a tension here and in all his writing, between observation and rational explanation and what might also be possible, though it might appear *im*possible. This tension, charged, for example, by the possibility of timeslip or the idea that time does not exist at all, is fuel to his writing, be that the dreamtime of *Strandloper*, the confluence of fraught emotional and violent relationships across time in *Red Shift,* or the life-changing moment that is the climax of 'Feel Free', a short story from a 1960s anthology, reprinted here.

There are other writers who could be regarded as working with similar ideas, but all too often they confine themselves to the genres of science fiction or slipstream, or 'write for children' as Garner's publishers once decided he did. Garner, however, is head and shoulders above most authors in invention, complexity, ingenuity and craftsmanship, as evidenced by the searching and intriguing material in this book.

Rupert Loydell

(With thanks to Robert Mapson)

(1050 words)